

## THE NAKED AND THE DEAD: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE DEAD AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: THE CASE OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

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### SUMMARY

The article proposes a hermeneutic approach to the films of M. Night Shyamalan based on a study of the convergence of three parallel processes: the detailed use of planning and, most of all, the shot-countershot, and the dialectic between field and out of field, the open construction of otherness; and, lastly, the narrative motif of the dead person who returns. The director manages to link those three aspects with a detailed investigation into the possibilities of the fantastic genre in order to metaphorically approach the problems of contemporary society and a new involvement of the viewer in the suspension of disbelief required by fiction.

### KEY WORDS

Film, Hermeneutics, Eschatology, Manoj Night Shyamalan, Death, Burial, Funeral, Accident, *Revenant*, Zombi, Other, Otherness, Threat, Narration, Story, Shot, Countershot, Field, Out of field, Suspense, Resurrection, Tragedy, Gnosis, Ricoeur, Antigone, Orpheus, Eurydice, Dreyer, Lang, Tourneur, Hitchcock, Lynch.

### ARTICLE

*“that flock of ill-fated shadows”,  
said my guide, “whom you have not been able*

*to look in the face, following in your footsteps".*

*and from the old bridge I saw  
a troop of shadows on the far side,  
scourged by the merciless whip.*

Dante, *Divine Comedy, Hell, Canto XVIII*

One of the fundamental narrative and iconographic motifs of the fantastic genre is the dead person who returns from the grave to demand or claim something. (1) In a large number of contemporary films in which the fantastic has become second nature to melodrama, that return has taken on an unusual formulation: the person has ceased to be a mere incarnation of an unsatisfied impulse, an outstanding debt, and has become the protagonist of a fiction caught on the fundamental ellipse of his own death, usually an unexpected and violent one. Having forgotten the accident which is the cause of his death, the *revenant* does not necessarily appear as a threat, nor does he trigger a retrospective fiction spun from the flashback, as in Billy Wilder's classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); he rather launches an incursion into a paradoxical space, a world between, where the time of the living and the dead is confused.

As opposed to what happens with traditional societies and with some contemporary cultures in which the mythological imaginary remains deeply rooted in psycho-social structures, (2) that interregnum shared by the living and the dead is not defined in these films as a purgatory or a space for reconciliation, but as an evanescent and precarious projection of the imaginary of death. In an attempt to group and define these films, Michel Chion (1983: 39) has coined the term "Bardo films" in reference to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the *Bardo-Thödol*. According to that text, after death the dead person's soul is unaware of its condition and wanders for a long period, while still believing that it is alive, and sees its family and its environment as if they were real. With the aim of promoting that metaphor, another theoretician, E. Boullot (2002: 9), has pointed out that the cinema today approaches post-mortem fiction with the idea of an irreversible time, not in its duration but in its possibility.

This new avatar of the representation of the dead person which consists of investigating the dreams that lodge behind his closed eyes, the last threshold in the figuration of the end in classical cinema, has crystallised at the turn of the century. (3) A large group of film-makers, among them Aki Kaurismäki, Steven Soderbergh, Pedro Almodóvar, Alejandro Amenábar, Quentin Tarantino, John Woo, Jacques Rivette or Andrei Zvyagintsev (4) have explored the return of the dead person or the victim of an accident sunk in a deep coma in such a way that, far from bringing the closing of the tale, death has become its opening. Television fiction has also exploited the same model in series like *Six Feet Under*,

*C. S. I.* and *The Kingdom*. (5) But there are two authors who, more than any others, have taken the mechanics of the Bardo film to their most diaphanous expression by presenting death as a symbolic fissure caused by an encounter with reality in a society as “analgesic” (6) as ours and by inverting the traditional correspondence of the alive-dead and field-out of field pairs: David Lynch in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and M. Night Shyamalan in *The Sixth Sense*.

The release of that second film in 1999 launched the career of the young director Night Shyamalan, whose later films show an extraordinary formal and narrative coherence. (7) As well as certain figures of style such as the slow, continuous movement of the camera and the wise use of overhead perspectives and reframings within the plane, *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* (2000), *Signs* (2002) and *The Village* (2004) are films imbued with a strong moral feeling, which subordinate the mythological nature of their structure to the everyday through an emphasis on the tragic gesture. They also introduce an ironic reflection on the system of belief and the suspension of disbelief, both of the viewer and of the characters. And in all cases they give the *mise en scène* over to a systematic exploration of the construction of the other or, more broadly, of otherness, whose most important expression is revealed in the polarity between living and dead.

This article is an account of an investigation into the representation of the other in Night Shyamalan’s films based on a hermeneutic methodology, one of whose fundamental precepts is that stories are not rigid forms but dynamic constructions which can order the experience of human space and time: “between the activity of telling a story”, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out, “and the temporal character of human existence there is a correlation which is not purely accidental, but takes the shape of a transcultural need. In other words: time becomes human time insofar as it is structured in a narrative mode, and the narration reaches its full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ricoeur, 1987: 117). Night Shyamalan’s films not only model time in a very specific way; they do so according to a deliberate “fit” into historical reality and the memory of the cinema. (8) Since an exhaustive study of that fit would be beyond the scope of these lines, the far more modest exercise we propose is to discover some of the processes that make it possible.

### **Death in the third person**

Insofar as stories are vehicles for communicating experience, one of their most important functions in all periods has been to palliate the fear of the destruction of that experience that can be communicated or, which comes to the same thing, temper the fear of death. By creating causal chains endowed with an ultimate meaning, stories establish a concordance between beginning and end and therefore transfer that pregnant meaning to the intermediate trajectory, which, as it is received, becomes a metaphor for

and a suspension of the very life of whoever is listening to the story being told. (9) Through the act of the narration the threat of devouring time is averted and that exorcism, which the different branches of hermeneutics embodied in Ricoeur, Gadamer, Cassirer, Durand or the *Círculo Eranos* (10) identify as the engine of the symbolic creations of human beings, reveals a close identification between the problem of the representation of death and that of the close or end of stories.

As Ricoeur has shown from the work of the literary critic Frank Kermode, we must bear in mind that there has been a gradual deterioration of the notion of a closed plot which can give rise to a full closure of the temporal dimension of the story on itself. Stories, understood as forms linked to the expression of a particular temporal imaginary, gradually opened up to discontinuity, first with the substitution of full forms like the epic by the novel and later, thanks to schismatic ideas like those of some writers and thinkers at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century: Proust, Mann, Joyce, Woolf, Pessoa and most of all the narratives linked to the literary atmosphere of Vienna, notably Musil, Kafka, Canetti or Walser. All of them managed to express a common difficulty in putting reality into words, a crisis of mutism (Duch, 2000) caused by the breaking of the individual's relation to the world, i.e. through the effect of a "break of trust" (Schütz, 1987).

The works of those authors, which bore witness to a sudden break of episteme in Western culture as a consequence of the exhaustion of the Enlightenment model and the introduction of modernity, managed in fact to signal the uncoupling between time, the narrative and the layers that mediate between the two categories: memory, history and oblivion. (11) From the praxis of the story they anticipated the theories of postmodernity and its declaration of the breaking of the "metanarratives" or great legitimising discourses, one of which is the integration of the experience of death. Almost at the same time that those writers were creating uneasy, "metamorphic" characters, "without attributes", dead and incapable of living, Walter Benjamin was observing through his narratives "how the collective awareness of the concept of death has suffered a loss of omnipresence and plasticity. In its last stages that process has accelerated. And over the nineteenth century, bourgeois society, by means of hygienic and social, private and public devices, produced a secondary effect, probably its true subconscious: to offer people the opportunity to avoid seeing the dying". (12)

The banishment of death which, however dramatic it might be, was a part of the life cycle in peasant and traditional societies, has extended since Benjamin wrote that appreciation in 1933, and today it has acquired the overtones of a complete asepsis. Only on the denial of death can a system like the one that structures contemporary capitalist societies, based on consumption and the creation of need, be built. The denial of death has been accompanied even by a harassment of maturity and the identification of the ideal ego with the *puber* as the emblem of a system which, unlike traditional societies, has eliminated the rites of passage to adulthood and replaced it with a strange prolongation of adolescence. That is why

a number of studies of the iconography of dying in the Western sphere speak of “inverted death” (Arlès, 1975, 1977), “withheld death” (Thomas, 1991), “death in the third person” (Jankélévitch, 1977) or even argue that “Western man (...) dies unevenly, dies badly and does not know how to die”. (13)

Likened to a breakdown or a flaw, conceived within the clinical framework and involved in a mechanical conception of the body, the extinction of the life of the individual is accompanied, moreover, by a gradual inhibition of mourning. But for all one tries to omit its figure, as Sánchez-Biosca (1995a: 30) points out, “the dying person would be the silhouette on which a story takes ideal shape. Death is the endorsement of everything the narrator can refer to and it is what gives him authority.” For that reason it infiltrates stories and generates a tension which manifests itself in different ways, from the iterative structure of certain tales and the associative logic of the dream to apocalyptic narratives and terror subgenres such as serial killers. (14) What there is no doubt about is that just as the core of the reflection on the crisis of the temporal imaginary and the situation of the being in the world in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century was the novel, now it is popular culture and especially the cinema, with its power to “show death at work” (15) and, more broadly, audiovisual stories, which configure one of the most sensitive and fertile spaces for an anthropological and hermeneutic study of the story. (16)

Just as the novelists mentioned before acknowledged the crisis of Western mutism, the *finis europae*, inoculating the virus of time in narrative forms which until then had been rooted in a concern with space, some directors opened a similar road in the cinema. Aware of the potential of the medium to transform appearances into ghosts stolen from time, they tried to strip the images of the naturalism inherited from 19th century novels and plays. Directors like Carl Theodore Dreyer, in *Vampyr* (1932), perceived that the transition to sound, far from putting an end to “the realm of shadows” of the silent cinema, revealed an abyss which, in the shape of a silent murmur, throbbed beneath the loquacity which had colonised certain genres and stories which had been lacking the word since the invention of film. At almost the same time as Dreyer, Fritz Lang in *Dr Mabuse (Das testament des Dr Mabuse)*, 1933) showed that, separated from its source of emission, the babble that made up the soundtrack of the film heightens the ghostly character of the shadows even more.

That breach through which the murmur of the shadows enters reappears in film-makers of the forties like Tourneur and Lang himself and turns into the mirror in which, from the nineties, film-makers as different as Shyamalan, Cronenberg or Lynch look at themselves. But together with that presence of the shadow, contemporary representation of the dead also overlaps with a second discourse, also rooted in modern literature: that of the films of European modernity. And so a narrative motif like death, which took root in the cinema after the trauma of the Second World War through films like *Germania, Anno Zero* (1947) and *Europa '51* (1952) by Roberto Rossellini, (17) has spread to a large number of films of the nineties and the turn of the millennium: directors like Kristof Kieslowski, Pedro Almodóvar, Manoel de Oliveira or

Clint Eastwood pose the traumatic irruption of reality through the accidental death of the child in a way that crystallises with the raw, drawn-out image of the electric drills nailing down the coffin of young Andrea in Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* (2001). (18)

With their different ideas, films about the return of the dead comb the shadow side where the dry exposition of the child's death ends, in the painful framework of the irreversibility of the sealed coffin, incapable of looking back at the countershot of the parents' faces. Located on the far side of that last forbidden threshold which the Greeks called *átê*, i.e. perdition or devastation, the dead person does not remember his burial rite, which has traditionally had a twofold utility: "to protect the living from the action of the dead and guarantee the survival of the souls of the dead" (Canetti, 1985: 265). The return of the dead in classical fantastic films is usually the consequence of the conception that all cultures have of the deceased as a survivor, capable of showing discontent and full of envy of his near ones if he is not appeased with sacrifices. But the persistence of the idea of the accident in contemporary cinema has encouraged the absence of an acknowledgement of death and the development of what the Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek (2000), using a Lacanian interpretative apparatus, has termed "between two deaths".

In such a way that if the classic ghosts, who can find their paradigm in Hamlet's father, return to settle some outstanding account as the embodiment of a single, specific impulse, (19) the contemporary cinema, after seeing with directors like Antonioni disappearance in the out of field as an expression of "death in the third person", has given itself over to an exploration of this new ghostly territory. Some of the most important contributions to this schema are to be found in the terror genre, in the novel and in the short story and films, where the classic figure of Antigone, demanding a proper funeral for her brother, has been substituted by individuals who can sabotage the normal burial of their relatives with a perverted funeral rite so that the dead person returns, though turned into a monster. That is the case of Creed, the protagonist of Stephen King's story *The Elephants' Graveyard* and follows a development of the figure of the zombie, which had already been tackled by the unusual film noir and fantastic B movies of the forties.

Lang, Tourneur and other directors delved into the figure of the zombie and the creation of atmospheres stripped of chronology, (20) where time, meaning and the close of the story are suspended in a way that reverberates in the films of Night Shyamalan. We should think that the rise of psychoanalysis and the war catalysed what Canetti (1985) would call a reinforcement of the second mass, the mass of the dead, as a counterweight to and projection of the living. But in any case the recovery of that poetics of suspended meaning allows us to venture new questions: the question "Why do the dead return?" –which may be answered with a succinct "because they have not been properly buried; because they have some business unresolved"- has given way to others: "What do we do with the dead?", (21) "What do the living want from the dead?" and even "Are the dead aware of their condition?" In that sequence of

questions, as Hitchcock disclosed in *Vertigo* (1958), we can glimpse a reorientation from the mythic paradigm of Antigone towards that of Orpheus, confronting the gods to enter the desert of devastation in search of his dead beloved, Eurydice. (22)

By transforming Orpheus' heroic labour into "the odyssey of a deceit", (23) *Vertigo* confronted the fragile nakedness of the living with the falsity of a spectre incapable of invoking the presence of the past –as the Gothic treatment of the *revenant* (24) would imply. Its influence not only shines through in *The Sixth Sense*, which is stripped of any Gothic rhetoric, but also in the tragic structure of Night Shyamalan's other films and the dry presentation of the supernatural intrusions, which reveals the essential mechanism of the fantastic genre. (25) But the director's main contribution lies in having turned the questions posed above into "symbolic forms" (26) thanks to a detailed control of planning and in particular the shot-countershot and the dialectic between field and out of field. If we bear in mind that the shot-countershot supposes an inclusion of the viewer in the three-dimensional space of the action, it should be no surprise that his films show a notable restriction of that visual figure since, in the context of his poetics, it always means taking the viewer "to the other side" and, moreover, opening a crack between worlds or confronting the character with the abyss of an out of field which is the void, awareness of one's own death.

### **A spectator who haunts the things of the other side**

Of all Night Shyamalan's films *The Sixth Sense* is the one that keeps most strictly to the bardo film model. The fact that it is also the one that uses the shot-countershot the most often should not be understood as a paradox, since the later films can be read as excursions into the world of shadows comparable to the one made by Dreyer on *Vampyr*. From the Danish director Night Shyamalan has learned to accompany the shots with a constant, hypnotic glide (27) which records his epiphany in the first shot-countershot of the child psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) and his killer, Vincent, who shoots him with a cry of "You failed me". The camera moves in opposite directions to record the meeting of their eyes, as if it were gliding along an invisible surface, and Vincent appears like a *revenant* ready to drag Crowe away to his world for not having helped him when he was a boy. Vincent's suicide is hidden thanks to another camera movement and gives way to Crowe's death, which is inexorably confined to the other side of that invisible surface.

From that moment until the end of the film, the director uses different strategies so as not to offer conclusive proof of the protagonist's condition and at the same time allows his journey, reread from the end, to reveal –to him and the viewer, who assumes his point of view- that he is dead. To begin with, Crowe only talks to little Cole (Hayley Joel Osment), in whom he is looking for a second chance to

redeem his failure with his treatment of Vincent. But even Cole, who has the power to see the dead, cannot immediately look at Crowe; Night Shyamalan first shows the boy followed by the doctor (sequence 4) and later avoiding looking up at him in the church (sequence 8), (28) talking to him without showing himself to him from the out of field marked by the sofa (sequence 14) or relegating him to the figure of an eye witness who cannot interrelate with the other characters (sequences 10 and 18), until he sets up a clear dialogue between the faces in sequence 22. In it the boy, tucked up in bed, admonishes the doctor for not being a good story-teller and not knowing how to introduce surprises into the story, and lastly confesses that he has the gift of seeing the dead.

The reversal of the “living-field” and “dead-threatening out of field” polarities established by the classic codes of the fantastic genre reaches its climax when Cole accuses Crowe of not helping him because he does not believe in him (sequence 34). (29) That it is the dead who cannot give form to the living because they do not believe in them is a novelty according to the representation of the flows of communication, which go from the dead to the living and not the other way around. One example is the function of the video: the recording of Crowe’s wedding is the only response to his widow’s gaze, and likewise the video is revealed as a vehicle for the voice of the dead in the sequence of the funeral of a friend of Cole’s. There it is a home video that allows the little dead girl to reveal that she has been poisoned by her step-mother during a funeral whose spatial construction recalls the epilogue of Dreyer’s film *Ordet* (1955), which culminates with the resurrection of the dead Inger. But resurrection, in the context of the codes established by Night Shyamalan, is only made possible through the second degree image, the videos, whether the one of the wedding or the one at the funeral.

Likewise, the only communication Crowe can have with his wife is when he has become aware of his condition and speaks to her in dreams, over her closed eyes, from that other side (30) which makes the living shiver. (31) Here there is a complete reversal of the iconographic motif of the living perplexed by the enigma of the closed eyes of the dead, and only at that moment can the film close. It thus appeals to the classical paradigm of the cinematic representation of passion, which according to Núria Bou (2002) crystallises in the shot-countershot device as the meeting of two eyes which have sought and finally found one another, but at this stage of the proceedings it is a broken passion which can only be read retrospectively and in out of field. (32) Likewise the construction of the hero in *Unbreakable* occurs in out of field, where the director uses the search for the antagonist, the supervillain Elijah (Samuel Jackson), with whose birth the film opens, to explain that David Dunn (Bruce Willis) has become aware of his powers.

All Night Shyamalan’s films open with an accident which has at least the triple function of inaugurating a peculiar heroic cycle, stressing the metaphorical entry into the world of shadows and, as a result, establishing a contract with the viewer based on the rethinking of his own system of belief in the story:



the murder of Crowe in *The Sixth Sense*, the derailing of a train in *Unbreakable*, the wife being run over in *Signs*, and, in the case of *The Village*, the double sacrifice of the death of the boy with whose burial the film begins and Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix) dying after being stabbed by Noah (Adrien Brody). In *Unbreakable* the rail crash enables the passage from one world to another, from the discontinuous, aerial universe of the strip cartoons to the liquid viscosity of the shot-sequence, which becomes the stylistic axis of this film. (33) That is why the sequence before the accident (sequence 2) plays at confronting the two worlds through the resource of planning a conversation from a panoramic tracking shot which swings from right to left, without cuts, in the interstice between two seats on a train, once again eluding the countershot and recalling the white segment between the strip cartoons.

Only David survives the rail crash and he rises from his stretcher in an image of resurrection similar to the ones that trigger the action in *Kill Bill* (2003) and *The Man without a Past* (2002). As Joseph Campbell points out in his description of the monomyth, i.e. the elemental heroic schema, "once the threshold has been crossed, the hero moves in a landscape of dreams peopled by curiously fluid and ambiguous forms, where he has to pass a series of tests" (Campbell, 1959: 94). From that moment, and guided by the gaze of his adversary Elijah, David embarks on what Xavier Pérez has called "a tragic apprenticeship" (2002), which consists not only of the development of an anagnorisis of his survival comparable to the one Crowe had to undergo for his death in *The Sixth Sense*, but also a raw confrontation with the weight of time that allows a dramatic rereading of the superhero of the strip cartoon. Only at the end of the film and after confronting his Achilles' heel, heavy stagnant water, can David recognise himself in the gaze of his son and Elijah in two shot-countershots (sequences 36 and 37) which, due to the length of the wait, acquire an unusual spatial and emotive value.

Shyamalan's arrangement, when tackling a story of superheroes, with all the expectations of action that entails, from out of field of the business of the superpowers and the melancholy punishment it means to the hero to know that he is in debt to the action of the supervillain, is repeated in similar terms in *Signs*. In it Shyamalan eludes the conventional showing of aliens and, according to the lessons of Tourneur and the Hitchcock of *The Birds* (1963), turns them into a pure abstract otherness which nevertheless has a gaze since, as Derrida recalls in his approach to the notion of the ghost, "*Le spectre, ce n'est pas simplement quelqu'un que nous voyons venir revenir, c'est quelqu'un par qui nous nous sentons regardés, observés, surveillés, comme par la loi*". (34) That unanswered gaze is also what brings about the transformation, the tragic apprenticeship in this film whose *mise en scène* eludes the camera movements that are so appropriate in *Unbreakable*. Although as in that and in *The Sixth Sense*, that transformation only comes about according to the spatial schema of the descent into the nocturnal depths.

Indeed, this film, which give support to the label of “transcendent fantastic” (Navarro, A. J., 2004) with which Night Shyamalan’s films have been defined, focuses on the recovery of the faith lost by the Reverend Graham (Mel Gibson) as a consequence of the death of his wife. Only through reclusion in the deep womblike space of the cellar in his house, besieged by the alien invasion, can Graham cease to be one of the living dead, believe again and as a result recover the possibility of seeing, since after being present at his wife’s death he shuns any other gaze throughout the film. That incursion into the maternal depths is a constant which is confirmed by the discovery of the –holy- water that puts an end to the extraterrestrials: the cellar in *The Sixth Sense*, the nocturnal waters in *Unbreakable* and the woods of *The Village* are the spaces of redemption that make it possible for the protagonists to be reborn in the face of otherness, rather like the close of a series of stories in which, oddly enough, the figure of the mother is always absent. (35)

The sequence we have mentioned in which Graham, his children and his brother are isolated in the cellar of the house is a master class in suspense and the creation of terror. Altogether Night Shyamalan’s films underwrite something already demonstrated by Dreyer, Tourneur, Kubrick, Polanski, Lynch or Cronenberg: that the inducement of fear in the viewer comes not so much from the exhibition of the horrible as the unease caused by the breaking of the causal chains which, in the classical model, underpin the advance of a narration which is configured as a structuring of questions and answers oriented towards a final closure. (36) But that sequence in particular, like the one which shows David discovering his strength by lifting weights in *Unbreakable* (sequence 20), shows a subtle control of the rhetorical handling of space, which in itself becomes a threat and unveils the nothingness which is fear, since everyone’s greatest fear is the fear of fear, in other words, the empty cinematic field which the image of the other has not yet penetrated.

The persistence of narrative and iconographic constants in Night Shyamalan’s films is emphasised by the reiteration of a similar sequence in *Signs* and *The Village*. In a locality like the one shown in this film, bounded by the idea of uncovering the empty stage trickery of fear and embodying it in the false threat of “those of whom we do not speak”, the greatest challenge facing the young men who are unaware of their elders’ trap is to stand as close as possible to the boundaries of the village with their arms open. By doing so they place themselves on the last threshold of otherness and the field, and only one person is capable of defying that total incarnation of the other and, later, of crossing the wood: Ivy (Bryce Dallas Howard), whose blindness turns her whole environment into a enormous out of field, waits for Lucius in an ecstatic sequence with slow motion and very pronounced music and holds out her hand to take him to the cellar which is identified as the only possible salvation (sequence 26), the necessary place for everyone except Ivy, where the gaze cannot be returned or the power of fear resolved.

In the framework of the logic of fear that rules the film, Lucius' confession to the Elders' court (sequence 7) arguing that he has no fear leads him inevitably to death. That same logic makes Ivy the heroine who becomes aware that the identity of the community has been built on a false image of the other which is inevitably linked to the sterile sacrifice of a child which contaminates the opening of the story. (37) Only Ivy can leave behind the ivory gate of the false dream and Night Shyamalan's ability to control identifications encourages empathy between the viewer and the girl which sustains the fear beyond the revelation of the falsity of her own environment in the whole journey through the leafy woods that surround the community. (38) When she reaches her destination, we receive the revelation that the boundary of the village, like the boundary of fiction, is not the dense woodland of Pennsylvania, shrouded in a perpetual mist, nor the threat of "those of whom we do not speak", but a solid concrete wall.

On the other side of the high walls the custodians of the dream patrol; a squadron of uniformed guards commanded by the demiurge Night Shyamalan, who has become the guardian of the secret, who prevent the irruption of a truly exterior other, the image of the world, its historical fit. (39) And so the viewer who begins by being "a wounded impulse that haunts the things of the other side", (40) an intrusion into the mind of the dead in *The Sixth Sense* –just a little more than the viewer of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, who has become the worm that gnaws the dreams of a dead woman (41)- ends by confronting his own otherness as a being in time, as an individual in history. Because Night Shyamalan, as well as invoking the history of the cinema from Hitchcock to the John Ford of *The Searchers* (1956) and *How Green was my Valley* (1941) calls on recent history in *The Village* to portray the deadly consequences that come from a mystification of the Edenic nostalgia which the United States is fighting for in a complete denial of the image of the other from which the mould of its identity is cut.

Night Shyamalan manages to transfer the reflection on the impotence of the subconscious to assume its own death to the historical sphere. (42) By choosing between two kinds of violence, one real and uncontrollable and the other bounded by the invention of the Elders, it is shown that what cracks the edifice of the fiction, which has become a metaphor for the United States, is not the exterior other, but its reinvention of otherness, which inundates the atmosphere with fears. With that the village seems to have been converted into an intermediate territory between life and death, in a state of emergency. The perennial nature of the fear the Elders wish to foster establishes a distance which presents the characters as zombies and reminds the viewer once again of the feeble foundations on which any fiction rests. The need to believe that one has one's image in Ivy –that "I know, but..." which is justified by her blindness- is propped up by Noah's death, which cancels out the initial death of the boy. (43) And so the gnostic exit to self-knowledge proposed by the earlier films takes on greater depth in *The Village* when it confronts the dead end of history.

Unlike Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2001), *The Village* does not propose a redemptionist critique of the United States but sets its call in a desire to rescue the sources of morality (44) and confront the individual with the tragic pathos entailed in accepting his fate. Although all of Night Shyamalan's films are crammed with Christian references, from the church in *The Sixth Sense* to the marks on the doors of the puritan community in *The Village*, there is no dogmatic theism in them, but an attempt to rescue the original cosmotheandric intuition (45) in the human being, the mystery. The director seems to be claiming, as Borges wanted, that the genre that defines existence is the fantastic. That is why a reading of these films as post-mortem fictions enables us to make an incursion into the web of whispers through which characters move who, like those of Musil, Canetti, Lang or Lynch, are tragic puppets in search of a meaning which will save them from the contingency they live in. They can only find it when they emerge from that world of shadows and recover their gaze to confront the other, to integrate the opposite and awaken from a dream in which the echoes of the whole history of the cinema reverberate.

## NOTES

(1) The notion of motif, which has been formulated in the field of iconography by authors such as Aby Warburg or Erwin Panofsky and in the field of literature through the formalists and scholars of the story such as Wladimir Propp, has also been conceived within the specific framework of the cinema. See: Balló, J., *Imatges del silenci* (2000) and, from the point of view of the great plot structures: Balló, J. and X. Pérez, *La llavor immortal* (1995).

(2) That union between the mythological and the psycho-social structures is understood here in a similar sense to the one given by Andrés Ortiz-Osés and Friedrich Karl-Mayr in their approach to the study of Basque culture and mythology from the symbolic hermeneutics in the different works they include in their bibliography. Moreover, José M. Andrade Cernadas' work *Lo imaginario de la muerte en Galicia de los siglos IX a XI* (1992) is interesting in order to understand the persistence of a certain imaginary of death in societies where that persistence has occurred.

(3) One of the few and unusual films that points to an incursion into the dreams of the dead in classicism is *Peter Ibbetson*, 1935, directed by Henry Hathaway and based on a work by Daphne du Maurier. It is an exaggeratedly Romantic melodrama which delighted the Surrealists in which Mary (Anne Harding) and Peter (Gary Cooper) are separated when he is sent to jail. But they both manage to overcome that separation by finding one another in their dreams, first, and eventually in a definitive post-mortem sleep.

(4) In their respective films *The Man Without a Past* (Mies vailla menneisyyttä, 2002), *Solaris* (2002) –a remake of the film of the same name by Andrei Tarkovsky-, *Hable Con Ella* (2002), *The Others* (2001), *Kill Bill* (2003-2004), *Paycheck* (2003), *Histoire de Marie et Julian* (2003), *The Return* (2003).

(5) *Six Feet Under* deals with the point of contact between living and dead from the events that develop around a undertaker's business. *The Kingdom (Riget)*, directed by Lars von Trier, takes the spectator into a hospital which becomes a contemporary adaptation of the Gothic mansion where a "badly buried" child is the origin of a kind of dialogue between living and dead which mixes different genres and has some striking parallels with David Lynch's series *Twin Peaks*. And in both *C. S. I.* and the sequel *C. S. I. Miami* the narrative structure of the autopsy and the figure of the coroner are ways of carrying to the extreme the idea of the possibilities of reversing time by showing on film the different explanations of the death of the corpse in a total derangement of the narrative.

(6) According to the expression used by Sánchez-Biosca (1995a) in a sense very close to the notion of "therapeutic society" or society of individual gnosis referred to by Lluís Duch in a number of his works, for example, *Estaciones del laberinto* (2004).

(7) There are two earlier works by M. Night Shyamalan, *Praying with Anger* (1992), an almost amateur production, and *Wide Awake*, (1997). The first is an almost autobiographical story of an Indian-American teenager and the second the story of a boy sunk in melancholy by the death of his maternal grandfather who decides to find God and ask him about the dead man. The director's concerns are similar to the ones he develops later: the boundaries of the other, the encounter with oneself, the discovery of the mission that must be accomplished in the world and a vague moral and theistic feeling towards which the denouement is directed. However, they have not been included in the body of work analysed because they lack the unity and formal and stylistic coherence of the later films, of which we can speak as a perfectly assembled whole.

(8) The term "fit" is understood in this case in the sense given it by Andrés Ortiz-Osés as "the search for meaning interpreted as an assembly of reality" when presenting the hermeneutics of the Círculo Eranos in the prologue to *Los dioses ocultos* (1997).

(9) See Kermode, F., *El sentido de un final* (1983) y Ricoeur, P., *Tiempo y narración*. Vol. I, II, III (1987).

(10) For an approach, see the works by Durand listed in the bibliography and: Various Authors, *Suplementos. Materiales de trabajo intelectual* (1994). Moreover this theoretical and methodological corpus has been developed elsewhere. See: Pintor, I. (2000). Moreover, we should point out that there is a strong collusion between the ideas of some these lines of hermeneutic investigation and authors linked

to the study of myths and religions such as Mircea Eliade (1955, 1981) or Hans Blumenberg (1991, 2004).

(11) According to Ricoeur, the narrative act invokes the essential feature of the “deep temporality” which, according to the theses of Heidegger (1971), takes the shape of a close unity of the three dimensions which are known as past, present and future: the “having been”, the “making present” and the “yet to come”. But as Ricoeur has been arguing in his most recent works (2000, 2004), between the temporal experience and the narrative operation three great entities mediate: memory, history and oblivion, which make it possible to set the story in life.

(12) “*El Narrador*” (*Der Erzähler*, 1933), in: *Para una crítica de la violencia y otros ensayos* (1991).

(13) As Trinh van Thao points out (1977: 11). Apud. Sánchez-Biosca, 1995a: 59.

(14) Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (1995b, 1995a: 46) develops this issue and also examines stalker-films and Brett-Easton Ellis’ narrative and explains it from a narrative phenomenology which promotes the visual economy of the killer as an organ without a body, in a somewhat similar way to the approach to the question made by Slavoj Žižek (2004).

(15) In Jean Cocteau’s celebrated phrase. A development of this idea of the cinema as the power of embalming appearances can be seen in André Bazin’s articles “Ontologie de l’image photographique” and “Mort tous les après-midi” (1951).

(16) We should point out that Ángel Quintana (2004) identifies the genesis of films about the return from death as the convergence between the death taboo and a process of reformulation of the identity of the cinema in the face of the new technologies.

(17) There are precedents in spheres such as Soviet epic cinema or even classic melodrama, like *The Crowd* (1928) by King Vidor, but even so it is a delicate narrative motif treated tangentially in the classical system. In Rossellini’s films, the sterility of the death of the child is presented as a crack in the symbolic framework which is not only individual, but implies a break in the story, the reason why we can speak in this case of a path between mythology and historical tragedy, strongly influenced by the Christian religion, whose dogma is rooted in tragedy and whose sacred book is far from being a mythological form comparable to those of other religions, which can be appreciated even in the fact that it takes the form of four versions of the tragedy embodied in the Gospels. But it must be borne in mind that in the modern cinema death can take other forms, as we can see in films such as *Mouchette* (1969) by Bresson or *Eraserhead* (1976) by Lynch, where the death of the child is mixed with an essential fear of the birth.

(18) Kieslowski in the first episode of the *Decalogue* (1989) and *Blue* (1993), Almodóvar in *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) and *La mala educación* (2004), Atom Egoyan in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), Ang Lee in *The Ice Storm* (1997), Manoel de Oliveira in *Je rentre à la maison* (2001), Steven Spielberg in *A.I.* (2001) and Clint Eastwood in *Mystic River* (2003). The frequency of the appearance of the motif has even surpassed other plots inherited from modernity, such as orphans and the attempt to be reconciled with the memory of parents, an issue which, as shown in Domènec Font's monograph *Paisajes de la modernidad. Cine europeo, 1960-1980* (2002), constituted one of the basic tensions between the classic cinema of Hollywood and the films of modernity, an issue that can be traced through Joyce's story *The Dead* in different key works of the modern cinema, from Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1953) to Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961) or Truffaut's *La chambre verte* (1978).

(19) According to Lacan and Žižek, the term "impulse" is understood as a demand not trapped in the dialectic of complexity of desire. "The impulse persists in a sure demand, in a 'mechanical' insistence that cannot be imprisoned with any dialectical artifice: I demand something and I persist in it until the end" (Žižek, 2000: 46).

(20) Santiago Fillol (2004) has exhaustively analysed the use of out of field in the cinema through the complexity he notes in Jacques Tourneur's films made for RKO. According to his theses, the construction of that out of field is a pioneer in a type of confrontation with the empty shot that develops with the modern cinema and has major consequences in films like those of Shyamalan.

(21) Robin Campillo's recent film entitled *Les revenants* (2003) openly poses that question to focus its plot on a wave of returns by the most recently dead, with the problems that entails for the lives of the living.

(22) In addition to all the bibliography close to the territory of symbolic hermeneutics about the return of tragedy in modern societies (Maffesoli, 2000; Lanceros, 1997), George Steiner has wisely analysed how tragedy has increasingly impregnated philosophical thought over the last few centuries as it seemed to be splitting from society in *The Death of Tragedy* (1993) and *Antigone* (1991).

(23) In the same sense Claudio Magris (1993: 24) gives this expression when applying it to the modern novel.

(24) Not only does Judy Barton (Kim Novak) pretend to be another woman, Madeleine Elster, in the eyes of Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) and carry out a simulacrum of her own death, she is also possessed by the spirit of Carlota Valdés, a dead woman who embodies the Spanish past of San Francisco. Consequently, when Scottie tries to get Madeleine back, he is looking for a false ghost –the real Madeleine has been murdered by her husband– possessed by another false ghost. For an

exhaustive analysis of the figure of the *revenant*, see: Pedraza, Pilar, *Espectra, descenso a las criptas de la literatura y el cine* (2004).

(25) As Tzvetan Todorov points out in his *Introduction to Fantastic Literature* (1980), the fantastic genre can be defined as an act of language according to the explanation, natural or supernatural, given of the extraordinary event. In any case there is a gradation of the fantastic between the mysterious and the marvellous.

(26) According to Ernst Cassirer (1945, 1951, 1971-76), from the field of philosophical anthropology, and Erwin Panofsky (1995), from iconographic studies, we should understand the symbolic form as an intimate union between a particular spiritual content and a sensitive sign. Panofsky uses the term in connection with the artificial perspective in Western painting, as an example of a symbolic form of great transcendence and stability in visual representations.

(27) See the different texts by Carl Theodor Dreyer collected in: Dreyer, C. T., *Sobre el cine* (1995).

(28) Each sequence contains countless little clues, unresolved signs or *non sequiturs* which nevertheless obtain a global explanation in the light of the rereading provided by the final revelation that Crowe is dead. In this case, for example, Cole says something significant in Latin to Dr Crowe – “*De profundis clamo ad te Domini*”- and explains his glasses without lenses by saying “Lenses hurt my eyes”.

(29) For an analysis of the classical coding of the field-out of field, see: Sánchez-Biosca, V. “El cadáver y el cuerpo en el cine clásico de Hollywood. The Body Snatcher (Val Lewton/Robert Wise, 1945)” (1993).

(30) The sequences that show the relation between Dr Crowe and his wife are outstanding; they elude communication between the two and maintain a controlled level of ambiguity between the fantastic explanation and the record of what may be interpreted as a crisis in the couple’s marriage. Here sequence (no. 11), in which Crowe arrives late to a date with his wife in a restaurant, is exemplary; he apologises and says “I just feel like I’m being given a second chance and I don’t want it to slip away”. Without looking, she says “happy anniversary”, pays and leaves. That is the beginning of a progression in which, through later sequences, we might think that she is beginning to have a relationship with another man.

(31) Even in those small details with which the dead man is presented, Night Shyamalan incorporates the history of the cinema. The shiver caused by the fall in temperature brought by *revenants*, the dead or people condemned to death recalls, in this case, the shiver of the protagonist in Jacques Tourneur’s *Night of the Demon*.



(32) There is also a reduplication of the resource as a paradigm of termination insofar as Cole and his mother, whose eyes have not met in shot-countershot throughout the film, finally do so in the traffic jam caused by a road accident. The emotional tension between mother and son which has been contained all through the film explodes in a cathartic sequence (no. 46) which confirms, in the mother's eyes, her son's connection with the world of the dead: Cole tells her that his grandmother has forgiven her for something only she and her mother could have known about.

(33) For an investigation of the poetic phenomenology of water, see: Bachelard, G., *El agua y los sueños* (1988).

(34) Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies de la télévision*, 1996: 135. Apud. Bullo, Eric, 2000: 10. See also Derrida, 2001: 75-85.

(35) As Núria Bou and Xavier Pérez point out in their article "Los milagros de Night Shyamalan" (2002).

(36) That notion of the classical story as the sum of causal chains which find a complete final closure has been defined from a formal point of view by David Bordwell (1995, 1997) as a "winding corridor" which ends up defining itself in a full structure.

(37) As Mircea Eliade has pointed out in a number of works, in antiquity some cultures performed a child sacrifice on the founding of a city, which consisted of the dismemberment of a boy and his burial in the place where the population would settle. See: Eliade, 1955.

(38) It is revealing to compare the density of the construction of the community and the wood in this film with the village and the woods of Tim Burton's *Big Fish* (2004), marked by the tone of a fable, or the groves which are the road to a ritual death in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995).

(39) Núria Bou and Xavier Pérez point out the cinematic character of this film and break down its complexity in the article "Dominios del miedo" (2004).

(40) "*Un pulso herido que ronda las cosas del otro lado*": this line by Federico García Lorca (*Poema doble del lago Eden*, from *Poeta en Nueva York*, 1929) seems appropriate to define the new status of the viewer proposed by film-makers like Shyamalan, Lynch, Cronenberg and, episodically, Atom Egoyan, Ang Lee or Steven Soderbergh from the 1990s.

(41) Lynch's option is more radical than Shyamalan's insofar as he never tries, at the end of the film, to relink all the causal chains and questions that have sprung up through the story. In *Mulholland Drive*, as in *Lost Highway* (1998), there is a radical confluence of the two sources mentioned before: the European avantgarde and the exploration of film as an opening to a world of shadows alien to naturalistic drama,

and the irruption of the suspension of meaning and the spatialisation of time which enters the heart of classicism from the forties.

(42) Freud (1915) points out in this regard that the subconscious does not know the idea of its own extinction, i.e., that it thinks itself eternal, a notion that takes on capital importance in that it incurs in the narrative resource of opening the fiction with a death and investigating a hypothetical post-mortem existence.

(43) Night Shyamalan pays attention to the different manifestations of the iconographic motif of the grave comparable to Ford's. There are two graves, the boy's and Noah's, which guide the journey of this film. We should also extrapolate the role within the fiction played by Noah to the media construction of some of the characters in which the United States has embodied the outside threat since the tragic episode of 9/11.

(44) According to Charles Taylor's expression (1994).

(45) According to Raimon Panikkar (1977, 1991, 1996), the term can be understood as the holistic intuition or unitary awareness, of "what knows", the known and knowledge; the metaphysical, the noetic and the empirical; the divine, the human and the worldly, in religious language.

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